

MICROCOSMIC TALES

100 WONDROUS
SCIENCE FICTION
SHORT-SHORT
STORIES

*SELECTED BY ISAAC ASIMOV,
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My dear! How you've changed!

Appointment on the Barge

by Jack Ritchie

Professor Bertoldt answered his door buzzer.

The girl who stood in the hall had pitch-black hair and dark luminous eyes. "I just *adored* your talk at Clinton Hall this evening and I simply had to come over here to see you instead of in front of all those other people. You must be the world's *leading* authority on reincarnation."

Bertoldt blushed a bit. "Actually, reincarnation is really a hobby with me. My field is psychology."

Her long lashes fluttered. "My name is Diana O'Flaherty. Is it true that you can actually send a person back to a previous reincarnation?"

"I did not actually *say* that I could do it, but I do believe that it can be done. Under the right circumstances, with the right subject, and so forth. That is, theoretically it is certainly possible that . . ."

She sidled into his apartment. "You hypnotize people?"

"That, of course, is the preliminary part of the procedure."

"But you have never actually tried your theories on a human being?"

"No. I have hesitated to use a human until I can be positive that no psychic harm will result to my subject. However, I do believe that last week I did succeed in sending a chimpanzee back several generations. How far back, I can't be certain. We had a bit of difficulty in communication."

"Why not take the big jump," Diana said eagerly. "Try a human being. I am your subject. I am your volunteer!" Her eyes fastened firmly and expectantly on his. "I am Cleopatra. Or at least I *was* Cleopatra. I just know it."

"What makes you so certain that you were Cleopatra?"

I just *feel* Egyptian. Besides, one of my grandmothers was an exotic dancer from Cairo. And for another thing, I just can't stand snakes. Professor, you've just got to send me back there. Not permanently, of course. Just to look around and refresh my memory."

Gazing into her eyes again, Professor Bertoldt felt somewhat warm, giddy, bold, and suddenly determined.

"All right," he announced. "Why not? It's about time I took the big step. To what point in Cleopatra's life do you wish to return? Her childhood, her exile in Syria, the Caesar episode?"

"Well, I was thinking of Mark Antony and that barge thing. When Cleopatra first met Antony, she was dressed as Venus and showed up on a barge. It was in this motion picture."

Bertoldt went to his set of encyclopedias and pulled out a volume. He read and nodded. "Oh, yes. That incident occurred in Tarsus in Cilia where she had gone to answer charges that she had helped the Republican forces during the Roman civil war following Caesar's assassination. Tarsus is in modern-day Turkey." He showed her the spot on his desk globe.

She frowned slightly. "Tarsus is inland. I don't see any water near it. How can you have a barge without water?"

"The Cyndus River formerly flowed through Tarsus, but it is nonexistent now." He pointed to an easy chair. "Sit down, lean back, and relax. Look into my eyes. Try to make your mind a complete blank."

In a matter of moments her eyes glazed.

Bertoldt spoke softly, soothingly. "You are going back in time. Back, back in time." He waited half a minute. "What do you see now?"

Her voice carried echo quality. "I see . . . I see the *whole* world. The entire round earth!"

"Good," Bertoldt said. "I want to give you the over-all picture first. Now we will slowly descend. You are going down, down, down. You are zeroing in on Turkey."

Bertoldt waited.

"All right," Diana said. "That should be Turkey down there below. But it isn't colored yellow like on the globe."

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"Never mind the map color. Just verify the shape."

"Tarsus," she said. "Yes, that should be Tarsus right over there. I see the river and a lot of small boats. But no barge."

"I have taken you back to the approximate year you want," Bertoldt said, "However, historians are rather careless about exact days. I will now fine tune. We will go forward slowly. One week. Now two. Now three."

At eight weeks, she said, "Hold it there. I see the barge. It's tied up at that dock. Take me back a few days to where it's coming up the river for the first time."

Bertoldt obliged.

"That's it," Diana said. "I see the barge now. It's coming around the bend. I'm at a thousand feet. Get me down on deck. I don't want to miss a thing."

Bertoldt slowly maneuvered her aboard the barge and waited.

Five minutes passed.

Diana's face whitened. "Bring me back. This instant!"

Bertoldt leaned forward. "What do you see? What is it?"

"Never mind," she snapped. "Just bring me back."

After half a minute, she sat up and glared. "I was an old crone of at least sixty."

Bertoldt blinked. "But that is impossible. Cleopatra died when she was thirty-nine."

Diana's eyes flashed. "I was one of her *slaves*! I got there just at suppertime and you wouldn't believe the garbage she fed her help."

At the door, Diana sniffed haughtily. "I don't see why people make all that fuss about Cleopatra anyway. She wasn't so damn good-looking."

She had been gone less than a minute when Professor Bertoldt's buzzer sounded again.

A tall broad-shouldered man stood in the doorway. "My name is Gerald Bonevicci. I heard you speak at Clinton Hall this evening and I was fascinated by what you said. I've never told anybody this before, but I am convinced that in a previous lifetime, I was Mark Antony."

Bertoldt closed his eyes. "My boy, it's been a long day and I have a headache."

But Gerald continued. "Even in high school when I read Mark's speech at the funeral of Caesar, I felt a certain

empathy. I believe that I know Mark Antony better than anyone else in the world."

Bertoldt shook his head. "The odds that you were Mark Antony are overwhelmingly against you. After all, millions of other people existed at that particular time too. You could easily have been just another soldier, or peasant, or even slave."

Gerald was not discouraged. "You hinted in your talk that you were on the brink of actually being able to transport people back into their pasts. Let me be your subject. Transport me back to the very moment in history when Antony first met Cleopatra."

Bertoldt blinked and then rubbed his jaw. He sighed. "Well . . . I wouldn't have to break new ground, so to speak. And I am curious. But I must warn you that there is no certainty where you will descend. Anywhere on earth for that matter. You could possibly have been a herder of swine in the forests of England." He indicated the easy chair. "Sit down there and gaze fixedly into my eyes."

Gerald, too, proved to be an easy subject.

"I see the world," he intoned hollowly. "The entire world."

"Fine," Bertoldt said. "I will now lower you slowly to the surface of the earth and I believe that you will automatically home-in to the place where you existed in Mark Antony's time."

Gerald spoke slowly. "I am hovering over Turkey. I feel myself drawn down. Down. I see the river. The city."

Bertoldt was a bit surprised. "You are coming down on Tarsus?"

"Yes," Gerald said. "And I recognize it. Even from up here. I see the barge coming in."

Bertoldt waited a few moments and then asked, "Are you on the barge now?"

Gerald did not answer.

"What is happening down there?" Bertoldt demanded.

Gerald continued to stare ahead, unseeing and uncommunicative.

A full three hours passed before a worried and perspiring Professor Bertoldt managed to bring Gerald back to the twentieth century.

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Bertoldt wiped his brow. "I thought you had gone beyond return. Didn't you hear me talking to you?"

Gerald appeared exhausted. "Yes, I heard you."

"Then why didn't you answer? What went on down there? Are you all right?"

"Yes," Gerald said. "I'm fine. But a little tired. There's one thing about this reincarnation business that neither one of us considered."

"Oh," Bertoldt said. "So you weren't Mark Antony?"

"No," Gerald said, "I wasn't Mark Antony." He looked away and blushed slightly. "I was Cleopatra."

For men may come and men may go, but—

And So On, And So On

by James Tiptree, Jr.

In a nook of the ship's lounge the child had managed to activate a viewscreen.

"Rovy! They *asked* you not to play with the screen while we're Jumping. We've told you and told you there isn't anything there. It's just pretty lights, dear. Now come back and we'll all play—"

As the young clanwife coaxed him back to their cocoons something happened. It was a very slight something, just enough to make the drowsy passengers glance up. Immediately a calm voice spoke, accompanied by the blur of multiple translation.

"This is your captain. The momentary discontinuity we just experienced is quite normal in this mode of paraspaces. We will encounter one or two more before reaching the Orion complex, which will be in about two units of ship's time."

The tiny episode stimulated talk.

"Declare I feel sorry for the youngsters today." The large